

Local forum focuses on crime prevention

by Frank Morris
staff writer

Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard told West Valley residents and officials he is focused on seeing crime rates drop.

He attended a crime prevention forum Aug. 9 at Agua Fria High School in Avondale.

Ernie Lara, president of Estrella Mountain Community College, moderated the event. Along with Goddard, speakers included Avondale Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers, Avondale Police Chief Kevin Kotsur, and Detective Jim Archer with the Avondale Police Department.

The forum, one of many to be held across the state, was designed to provide information on local crime prevention initiatives, and to allow the public to raise concerns about crime and fraud in the community.

"We hope to learn more about crime trends, but also what law enforcement is doing and how we as citizens can help in this effort," Lara said.



View photo by Frank Morris

ARIZONA ATTORNEY GENERAL TERRY GODDARD talks with Avondale Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers at a forum on crime prevention Aug. 9 at Agua Fria High School in Avondale.

Eyes on the street

Lopez Rogers spoke on the importance of neighborhood Block Watch programs.

"Block Watch crime prevention programs are a proven and effective means to successfully reduce the incidents of residential burglaries in a specific geographical area, and reduce incidents of other crimes," Lopez Rogers said. "An effective Block Watch program is the cornerstone of all crime prevention programs because it invests the active participation of our residents in cooperation with the police department to reduce burglaries and other neighborhood crimes. You are the eyes and ears of the police department."

The mayor listed a few items to keep in mind for people seeking to start a Block Watch program.

"First and foremost, talk to your neighbors. See if they're interested in forming a Block Watch. Contact the police department's crime prevention unit for an information packet. Set a convenient

meeting time for you and your neighbors to meet with a representative of the police department to discuss the Block Watch program," she said. "Register the Block Watch with the police department. Maintain your Block Watch by having at least one meeting each year, although I encourage you to meet more frequently to have the most positive effect on your neighborhood. Together, we can protect each other, and make our communities a safer place."

Crime stats

The police chief provided forum attendees with information on crime trends in Avondale.

Between October 2005 and July 2007, the total number of fraud violations in the city has steadily increased from about 36 cases per month to 47 cases per month, Kotsur said.

Identity theft violations in the city have also risen, from no reported incidents in October 2005 to "roughly 16 cases in

the last year, and it fluctuated over the 2½-year timeframe, but the point is, you can see and look at the average: There is an increase, and the increase is continuing throughout our jurisdiction," Kotsur said.

Regarding the total number of drug violations, "again, you'll see a steady increase over the last two and a half years, peaking out here with roughly 33 cases on the average per month. Obviously, it's something we're trying to attack to decrease that amount and the slight increase over the 2½-year timeframe," he said.

The number of burglaries, on the other hand, has decreased in Avondale from October 2005 to July 2007, he said, attributing the decline to bicycle officers and a new police beat system.

With regard to thefts, the numbers are relatively flat, he said, "but there is an increase there. We had roughly 210 in October of '05, and then a spike in November of '06 of 350."

Auto thefts have also declined in Avondale, he said.

The number of auto thefts across the state has also declined, Goddard said.

In 2002, Arizona was ranked first in the nation for most auto thefts — 60,000 vehicles were stolen in the state that year, he said. "Since then, I'm pretty pleased to say, the numbers have come down significantly. We're now only No. 3, and we have aspirations to be like No. 50. We want to change vehicle theft in this state."

Fraud and identity theft

At the forum, Archer provided tips for reducing the damage fraud crimes can create.

"With fraud being the No. 1 crime in Arizona, you have to be vigilant for yourselves, and make sure that you report these types of crimes to us immediately," the detective said. "The faster the response, the better chance everybody has to come out ahead of these types of crimes."

Archer also advised checking one's credit report at least once a month, placing fraud alerts on bank and credit card accounts, and closing those accounts as quickly as possible if one notices his account being compromised.

To prevent fraud from happening, the biggest suggestion Archer could offer was to shred all documents with important information, he said, adding "don't leave many documents in your car, [and] when you're at home, make sure you lock up all your personal information in a safe place."

Additionally, it would be wise to not carry too many documents in one's wallet, such a horde of credit cards, one's Social Security card, birth certificates or passports, Archer said.

"There are just too many people who are victims of identity theft, and their numbers are increasing," Goddard said, adding 80 percent of consumer calls to the Attorney General's Office have been placed because of identity theft.

"The fraud artists who commit identity theft are very clever, and they've

(See Crime on Page A26)

Crime

(From Page A25)

figured out and they're constantly changing, they're constantly morphing into different kinds of schemes," he said, citing phishing and pharming, in which individual scam artists pretend to be legitimate agencies requesting key pieces of financial information.

"The key fact here is no legitimate financial institution will ever do that, so hopefully you're protected, but help me spread the word that other people, your friends and neighbors, also know that if they get an e-mail, however credible it may look, asking you for personal financial information, it is a fraud. Don't do it. Delete that or send it to law enforcement because it could get you into serious trouble," Goddard said.

Property crime and meth

One of the reasons property crime rates are high across Arizona is because of the high incidence of methamphetamine abuse in the state, Goddard said.

"We cannot arrest or prosecute our way out of the meth problem. People have to know, and most important, our families have to talk about it, they have to talk to their kids what they know about meth, what's fact, what's fiction," he said. "I believe meth is a killer. It literally takes the soul away from people; it changes them in ways that are not good for

them, their families or their communities."

Goddard believes the public service announcements from the Arizona Meth Project are getting the message out to youths about the ills of meth and sparking conversations about the drug at home, he said, adding the sudafedrin ordinance that was passed has had a profound impact on reducing the number of

labs across the state. "I'm very aware of the fact that with the campaign we have against meth, it makes other illegal drugs look like health food, and they are not, but meth is so much worse than anything else we have seen on the street."

Resources

A number of crime prevention tips, resources and services have been provided on the Arizona Attorney General's Web site at www.azag.gov.

Avondale is also partnering with the Attorney General's Office for a free class on identity theft prevention, open to the public, to be held at 6 p.m. Aug. 23 at the Avondale Civic Center Library, 14350 W. Civic Center Drive. No registration is required. For information, call Ava Gutwein at 602-651-3501.

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